

Iran in the Dark

Sana Abhari

I used to wake up in panic from what had become a recurring nightmare—perhaps the equivalent of dreaming you’re naked in public. In my dream, I am standing in the middle of an intersection. A mosque is nearby, a synagogue sits behind me and there is a church just a few blocks away—all historical remnants of multiethnic and multi-religious coexistence. I am in beautiful Esfahan, Iran, my hometown. I am not naked. I am fully clothed, but I raise my hand up to my head to feel my hair and panic—I’ve left my head cover at home. I quickly look around waiting for a revolutionary guard (IRGC) member to shove me into their patrol car and take me away. I wake up relieved that it was just a dream; but I also feel an emptiness and longing. I want to be back in Esfahan. I lay back down hoping to dream of Iran again, but to dream of a prosperous Iran without fear.

I grew up in Iran and unfortunately, the images in my dreams are realities I witnessed. They didn’t happen to me. They happened to my older female cousins for showing too much hair, for wearing a jacket that was “provocative,” or for an innocent date in public. I recall shopping with excitement for my “maghnaeh,” the headcover piece of my school uniform, before attending my all-girls school where even as first graders, we were expected to wear a headcover. Not too much later in life, however, I began to feel the suppressing meaning of involuntarily covering my hair, and then, even headcovers adorned with Minnie Mouse did not excite me anymore.

While I cannot erase the images of my cousin running after the IRGC car that took her little sister away for “not being covered enough,” or any other IRGC encounter, I am in awe every time I see pictures of beautiful and fierce women without headcovers in the bustling cities of Iran. In some ways, the headcover symbolizes the Iranian women’s slow resistance against the Regime; showing more and more of their hair gradually, until the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement, when their slow resistance turned into blatant defiance of headcover laws.

I moved from Iran to the United States when I was 11. As an immigrant and as an attorney in the immigration field now, I am far too familiar with the paradoxical experience facing our clients in America. There is hope for a new life in the “free world.” Yet, our bodies and souls contain a lingering longing—a forever nostalgia—for the country we left behind. For most Iranian immigrants, there is another hope. A hope for Iran. An Iran that can show its beauty and history to the rest of the world. An Iran that can breathe fresh air with its rivers full of water. An Iran we can return to, without fear. An Iran where young girls can grow up manifesting a life for themselves without government oppression and where living a comfortable life isn’t a pipe dream despite years and years of hard work and education.

On Wednesday, January 7th, when my focus should have been on the ICE tragedy in Minnesota, my eyes and ears were glued to the scarcely available coverage about what was day 11 of Iran’s widespread protests (or arguably revolution: see The Atlantic article, “Is the Iranian Regime About to Collapse”). Iranians have had visions and dreams of a new Iran since the 1979 revolution took hold 47 years ago. Strikes, protests and even large-scale movements are woven into Iran’s post-revolutionary history. On this particular occasion, economic pressure caused by rising inflation, currency devaluation and of course non-targeted U.S. sanctions gave rise to the protests that began in Tehran’s Bazaar. Within a few days, the protests spread nationwide with calls and chants for govern-



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ment change. The government eventually shut off all internet communications.

When communication lines were open, however, we were hearing from people in Iran that there is a different feeling this time—a hope that surely ran through those who risked their lives by taking to the streets in defiance. In this regard, I can’t help but think the Iranian women’s fearless defiance of headcover laws after the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement was a necessary catalyst for the current moment.

For Iranians abroad who have both cautiously and enthusiastically supported their compatriots, what began as a kernel of hope was quickly coupled with anxiety and fear. Once again, the Regime shut off the internet and phone lines and terror reigned in Iran. For weeks, Iranians abroad had no news from their loved ones and feared for their safety. And not just for their loved ones—when asked whether they have anyone in Iran, the diaspora responded with a resounding, “Yes, 90 million people.”

I am no historian or politico. I am just deeply in love with Iran, its culture, its history and its language. And I am a mother. I named my Covid baby Omeed (“hope” in Persian), envisioning a better and brighter future for both Iran and the United States. I tell him stories of my childhood in the magical place that is Iran and dream of getting together with my family and friends, drinking tea, singing and dancing—how all good Persian gatherings begin and end. I have dreams for him, and I want my family and friends to be able to dream for themselves and their children too. Romina, Ali, Mandana, Mozghan, Ehsan, Parsa, Ghazaleh, Arman, Masih, Niloufar, Shirin and Asmaa, don’t break up with your dreams.

But I am an advocate, too. For my clients, yes, but most certainly for humanity. We continue to face our own inhumanities here in the United States. Although imperfect and arguably at risk, there are checks and balances, there is a system of representation, and there is the U.S. Constitution. It is also very inspiring to see the younger generations freely advocating against what is simply unlawful and wrong. So, I have a plea to them and all advocates of humanity: that alongside speaking out against ICE brutality and supporting immigrants, to also make room to advocate for the Iranian people so they are not forced into immigration. One place to start is to call for safe and reliable communication for them so at the very least, they are heard. As Iranian poet, Saadi Shirazi, famously said:

*“Human Beings are members of a whole
In creation of one essence and soul
If one member is inflicted with pain
Other members uneasy will remain
If you have no sympathy for human pain
The name of human you can not pertain”*

– Saadi Shirazi

